

Fleet Master Chief: It's an 'Us' Problem

Military.com - 12 April 2017 by Fleet Master Chief Russell Smith

Fleet Master Chief (SW/IW/AW) Russell L. Smith is the Navy's Fleet Master Chief for Manpower, Personnel, Training, and Education.

Last month, the military was reminded that toxic, unprofessional and inappropriate behavior still exists in our ranks. And despite repeated efforts to curb this activity, we've discovered bad actors have found a new home in the shadows underground.

This is not a male or female problem, nor is it a generational problem. It's an US problem. And we have to be willing to face it, to own it and fix it.

Part of the solution requires a fundamental shift in the way we approach this issue, from a passive stance to an active one. If you're not taking an active role to stop sexual harassment and assault, you're part of the problem. This isn't just about the heinous acts we read about in the papers; it's about the jokes, the off-hand comments, the giggles that imply we're "ok" with a culture that, in the end, enables those who would take that poor mindset to the next step, committing bad acts. The problem is not that we tolerate sexual assault or sexual harassment, it's about the fact that we sometimes ignore a sexist culture or turn a blind eye to the quiet, gentle warnings that there may be far more below the water than the tip of ice that we can see with our eyes.

The "white noise" of silence and tacit approval enables a bad culture to grow and fester. When others make vulgar comments or jokes, what do you do? Sit silently? Or even worse, laugh along?

Tolerating vulgar comments from our peers, subordinates or seniors gives others the impression that we condone that behavior, or might go easy on someone who does. We must get past the inability to speak out and not let fear of acceptance ruin us.

I've never been a fan of that word ... "bystander." A team sinks or swims based on what they do as a whole, not as individuals who watch from the shoreline.

A Senior Chief Petty Officer at my last command says it well: "Bystander by definition means 'not a part of.' But aren't all members of a company or division both a 'part-of' the problem AND the solution?" He is right.

When we fight, we depend on each other with our lives. We have to trust the person to our left and right to have our back. There are no bystanders. Everyone is engaged -- and must be to win.

We shouldn't be discussing what we'll do when we're called on to participate from the sidelines. Rather, we should take an active role and demonstrate how our actions, our words, our mannerisms, our implied language, as well as what we explicitly say affect the entire team. Shine a light into every corner and ensure that negative behaviors have no place to hide. From there, a healthy environment will grow and all of our team-mates will be valued.

Furthermore, when we discover something that is inconsistent with our core values or "who we are," if we don't move swiftly to cut out and destroy that cancer, it will absolutely become a part of us and "who we are." We cannot let ourselves be tainted by a pathetic few who do not share our same values.

We are ALL leaders in the Navy and should feel an obligation to talk about this, as well as the subculture that has given toxic behaviors a home. You are a Sailor at all times, in cyberspace as well as in real life, and must consistently act with honor, courage and commitment. Nothing else will do.